

THE ANIMAL ART OF THE EURASIAN STEPPES

By MAX LOEHR

The subject of the following article is a field in the history of art on which only the last few decades have thrown some light—the art of the Eurasian nomads. While European scientists were at first inclined to see it only in connection with the Scythians, who dwell in those parts lying closest to Europe, the latest research, including that of the author himself (who is attached to the Deutschland Institut in Peking), has uncovered interesting threads reaching from the territories inhabited by the ancient Scythians to northwest China.

THE regions lying north of the Black Sea, the scene of turbulent historic events up to our own days, is, seen from a wide geographical point of view, the western appendage of an extensive belt of steppes running from Manchuria and Mongolia right across the Asiatic continent. This fact has had a determining influence on the fate of the nations inhabiting those parts. From the European historical point of view, this area, lying on the extreme northeastern edge of the Greek *oikoumene*, was usually as far removed from the center as it was in the eyes of the Greeks in the centuries before Christ. But this does not apply to the present day, particularly not to the Soviet Union, which—as was recently shown in "Stalin the Historian" (*The XXth Century*, October 1944)—in its attempt at altering the face of history is endeavoring to link its early history with the ancient Scythians.

If we replace purely geographical terms with "Scythia," we refer to no less than the name of the most powerful empire ever to have arisen here in ancient times, derived from the name of the best-known of the nations we meet with here in the past. The best-known, yet known to most only from Herodotus's descriptions, half-legendary and unreal. The term "Scythian" only acquired an atmosphere of reality again when Russian archaeologists began in the last century to open the mighty barrows and brought to light surprising, rich finds from the tombs of Scythian princes.

Who were these Scythians, whose art, formerly ignored as the work of barbarians, has gradually been discovered in Europe during the last few decades? Whence do they originate, to which ethnical group do they belong?

THE SCYTHIANS

The most concise report on a large migration of peoples toward the end of the eighth century before Christ is cited by Herodotus in the *Arimaspea* of Aristaeas. According to this, the Arimaspians drove out the Issedons, the Issedons pressed against the Scythians, and the Scythians forced out the Cimmerians on the "South Sea" (Black Sea). This tells us that the invasion of the Scythians came from the northeast and was

caused by corresponding movements of Central Asiatic tribes. In another place Herodotus says: "The nomad herdsmen once lived in Asia; but, forced out in war with the Massageties, they migrated across the Araxes [=Yaxartes, Syr Darya] and conquered the land of the Cimmerians." This is supplemented by Assyrian documents from the latter half of the eighth and seventh centuries B.C. which state that the Gimirrai (Cimmerians) advanced from the north against Chaldea, and that the Ashguzai (Scythians) pressed from the east.

So the Scythians appeared toward 700 B.C. in the territories north of the Black Sea ruled until then by the Cimmerians. The Cimmerians, who had themselves arrived there as conquerors, were probably a people of Thracian origin which had in part intermarried with the native population. The natives, not entirely subjected and known under the collective name of Maeotians (Palus Maeotis=Sea of Azov), were tribes with a matriarchal constitution whose women—presumably the Amazons of the Greek legends—participated in war and hunting, martial priestesses of their deity, a *Magna Mater* or *Potnia Theron* (Mistress of Beasts), whom we know best by her Greek names: Demeter, Artemis. The Scythians themselves, living under a patriarchal order, were an Iranian people, as is revealed by the names of their kings and other linguistic remains. In looking for their original home, what is now Russian Turkestan and Western Siberia seem to offer the right answer; there are no convincing arguments for placing it further east, for instance in the basin of Minussinsk (on the upper Yenisei), in spite of evident cultural connections, unless the term "Scythian" be taken in a wider sense. Incidentally, it is not at all certain whether the Skolots, as the Scythians called themselves, were pure Iranians; the admixture of Finnish elements is possible, their eastern neighbors and temporary oppressors, the Issedons, being regarded by some scholars as belonging to the Finno-Ugrian stock. Furthermore, a Hunnic (Turko-Mongolian) contingent may be assumed, unless Mongolian groups mingled with the Scythians at an early date.

To judge by their appearance, known to us

from Greek representations on silver and electrum vases (Figs. 1, 2), they are unquestionably related to the Aryan tribes of the Persians and Medes or the Sacians. Relief figures of Sacian warriors in the palace of Persepolis from the days of King Darius show great resemblance to these Greek portrayals. The latter show us long-haired, bearded men in long jackets and long trousers bound at the ankles—a costume very similar to that of the Huns, as it is described in the Chinese Annals. Their weapons consisted of the bow—a reflex bow which was carried, together with the arrows, in a quiver on the left side; short lances, the battle-ax, and the short sword, which latter, together with the bow, was particularly characteristic of the Scythians.

WESTERN EXPANSION

Those groups of the Scythians which had settled in the north gradually spread from the Kuban River and the Taman Peninsula westward and northwestward to the lower Dniepr and lower Bug. The empire which they founded here after prolonged fighting under the leadership of the Royal (or Free) Scythians endured for more than four centuries. The seventh century B.C. brought endless campaigns and, above all, a constant contact with the powerful empire of the Assyrians who, under Esarhaddon, allied themselves with the Scythians to wage war upon the Cimmerians and Chaldeans. It was apparently under the pressure of the Scythian groups advancing north of the Caspian Sea that the Cimmerians had moved into Armenia and Asia Minor. Part of the Scythians also invaded Asia Minor, which suffered from their marauding expeditions and whose southern and eastern territories they dominated for almost a generation, until they were finally driven off by the Medes and Persians. We can safely assume that there were brief contacts with Mesopotamia and Luristan during this century, while Caucasia proper was probably traversed on several occasions.

Archaeological finds dating from the sixth and fifth centuries B.C. reveal an amazing expansion in the northwest. During this time, there were

Scythian settlements in Hungary and Transylvania as well as expeditions into Germanic territory: small discoveries of weapons were made in Silesia and eastern Brandenburg; and in Vetersfelde, Brandenburg, the famous gold treasure of a Scythian prince—dating from about 500 B.C.—was discovered, the most important Scythian find outside the borders of Russia.

King Darius of Persia started a campaign about 513 B.C. against the consolidated empire of the Scythians, which took him through Thrace and Bessarabia as far as the Dniestr without, however, his succeeding in defeating them decisively.

NEIGHBORS

Relations between the Scythians and the aborigines, whom they had neither destroyed nor ever subjected entirely, meanwhile developed along peaceful lines, and a lively interchange of trade and commerce sprang up with the Greek colonies on the Black Sea. It was principally the Ionians who had secured a foothold during the sixth century in rapidly growing fishing and trade settlements in the ports of the northern shore, rather favored than impeded by the nonmaritime steppe dwellers. As amicable and reliable trade partners of the Greeks, they apparently amassed great wealth, and Ionian artisans in the coastal emporiums such as Olbia on the mouth of the Bug, and Panticapaeum (Kerch), their potters and goldsmiths worked for them.

They themselves, the milkers of mares (*hyppemolgoi*), as the Greeks nicknamed this race of horsemen, kept out of the towns, in the steppes, in their armed camps or villages or stud farms. Indeed, the Scythians were excellent horse breeders, and it was their cavalry which—as later in the case of the Mongols—gave them their military superiority, the possibility of fast movements over long distances. Their horses were greatly prized in the ancient world; the Roman historian Justinus reports that Philip of Macedon, after defeating the Scythians in 339 B.C., carried away twenty thousand of their horses to improve his stock.



Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4

FIG. 1 Silver bowl from Voronezh, 4th cent. B.C. (Hermitage, Leningrad)

FIG. 2 Electrum vase from the Kul-Oba barrow near Kerch, 4th cent. B.C. (Hermitage, Leningrad)

FIG. 3 Stag (chased gold plaque) from Kostromskaya Stanitsa, Kuban region. (Hermitage, Leningrad)

FIG. 4 Boar's head (bronze) from the Barrows of the Seven Brothers, Kuban delta. (Hermitage, Leningrad)

The reason for the Macedonian campaign was the defense against the Scythian advance in Thrace in the fourth century B.C. This advance was probably caused by an undermining of their position in the Kuban territory and on the lower Don. The power of the Scythians was finally shattered here in the third century by the appearance of the Sarmatians, —likewise of Iranian origin—who, since the beginning of that century, were advancing westward across the Urals and who reached the Dniepr about 250 B.C.

During the same period, an unexpected new threat also arose for the Scythians in the west by the advance of Celtic and Germanic tribes who invaded the territories north of the Danube and west of the Dniestr which the Scythians had hitherto held against the Thracians. The Scythian empire was unable to cope with these blows, and it disintegrated in the course of the third century B.C. Remnants of the Scythians withdrew into the Crimea, other remnants may have sought refuge in the Caucasus. Thereafter they ceased to play any important role in history.

That is all that may be briefly stated today about the fate of the Scythian empire. It was replaced by a new Iranian wave, the Sarmatians, who advanced from the region north of Lake Aral across the Volga and then across the Don, horsemen again, whose favorite weapon was not the bow but the heavy lance and the long sword. For a period of five hundred years, the Sarmatians or, to be more exact, their main tribe, the Alans, remained the leading power in the steppes north of the Black Sea, in the northeast of the Roman Empire: from the second century B.C. up to the third century A.D.

Those of our readers who are interested in more details are referred to *Scythians and Greeks*, by E. H. Minns (Cambridge, 1913); *Iranians and Greeks in South Russia*, by M. Rostovtzeff (Oxford, 1922); and *Sammlung Baron E. v. d. Heydt*, by V. Griessmaier (Vienna, 1936), which lists the literature to have appeared on the subject up to that time.

SOURCE OF SCYTHIAN ART

Just as it is impossible to separate the appearance of the Asiatics on the Black Sea from inner-Asiatic events, economic or political changes which may have taken place far in the east of the nomad world without our being able to trace them individually, in the same way it is impossible to separate that which we know about the culture and art of the Scythians and Sarmatians from the complex of steppe cultures.

The art treasures supplied by the tombs of Scythian princes—whose magnificent and sanguinary burial ceremony Herodotus describes so impressively—show a curious mixture of Greek, Oriental, and northern Asiatic elements. While

the Greek proportion with its reliable chronology and the Mesopotamian influence can be clearly distinguished the "northern Asiatic" source has remained dark, even mysterious; and, in spite of many years of research, nothing more can be said with ultimate certainty about it yet than that it must have existed and that Scythian art represents a local manifestation of the "Eurasian animal style." This term comprises the peculiar miniature art of the nomads which, in spite of all regional differentiations, is on the whole fairly uniform, is at home in the steppe and desert regions of Eurasia, and whose almost exclusive subject is the animal.

An example of early Scythian art is presented by the magnificent chased-gold stag of Kostromskaya (Kuban), which was discovered in a tomb dating from the sixth century B.C. (Fig. 3). The clear cutting in broad surfaces, the emphasis on functional elements, the restraint with regard to ornamental license characterize the style of this animal figure. And this style indicates that we are confronted here by anything but a primitive or archaic art. Since this manner of representation is to be found at the earliest stage of Scythian art, revealing a fully developed style with its typical traits, the question arises forthwith as to where the roots of this art might be.

As a further example, let us study the boar's head from the Barrows of the Seven Brothers in the Kuban delta, which must be ascribed to the fifth century (Fig. 4). It, too, shows the poignant proportioning, almost dissection, of the object, presented in slight exaggeration, with an undeniable inclination toward ornamental shaping, and yet sustained by a thorough knowledge of the organism. Again so perfect a shape, breathing the skill almost of a caricature, that it automatically eliminates any idea of primitive workmanship.

Disregarding Central European finds, excavations made so far allow us to distinguish the following centers or provinces of the animal style:

Scythia (Euxine, Black Sea)
Ananino (Eastern Russia, Kama region)
Western Siberia
Perm
Altai
Minussinsk (Yenisei basin)
Mongolia
Sui-yüan and the Ordos region

As a center of origin, Ananino and the Perm region are excluded by reason of minor importance and age of the discoveries made there. Western Siberia is not well enough known yet and seems to supply mainly Sarmatian products belonging to the fourth and third centuries B.C. The Outer Mongolian finds also date so far from a comparatively late period (Noin Ula). Nor have scientific excavations in the Altai produced anything leading back beyond the second century B.C.

EARLY SIBERIAN CULTURE

The situation becomes different when we turn to the Minussinsk and Ordos finds. In Minussinsk—the best-explored Bronze Age region of Siberia—animal figures used as ornaments and closely related to the Scythian ones appear at the latest about 500 B.C., i.e., almost simultaneously with the Pontus finds. Hence it has generally been assumed that the animal style migrated here from Scythia. Recent research seems, however, to contradict this assumption and speak for a certain autonomy of the Minussinsk forms. Beyond that, objects—which are not necessarily “Scythian”—appear at an earlier cultural stage also belonging to the Bronze Age, objects pertaining to the Eurasian animal style and dating from a period of about 1000 B.C. This Karasuk culture, as it has been called, was characterized by so competent a scholar as E. H. Minns as looking “very like the common ancestor of the Scythic.” On the other hand, the lesser wealth, the inferior artistic level of the Minussinsk material in comparison to the Pontic discoveries always led again to Minussinsk being regarded as an impoverished offshoot or as an undeveloped forerunner, at any rate not as the original center of radiation.

If we consider the small relief of a crouching stag (Fig. 5)—whose date cannot be determined exactly—we cannot deny the greater freshness and originality, the freedom and vivacity that distinguishes it from the Kostromskaya stag (Fig. 3), which at first looks very similar. In spite of all resemblance, there is something different in the outline of the animal, in its antlers, and in the modeling. Although the majority of the Minussinsk animal bronzes are more schematic in their design, this full-blooded realism, which is lacking in Scythia and can therefore not have derived from that region, is an important point in favor of the independence, if not priority, of the Minussinsk animal style. It has not, however, been possible to penetrate to the earliest beginnings or “original home” of this style which, according to G. Borovka's hypothesis, may perhaps be found in the northern Siberian forest zone.

But among the elements of the Karasuk stage there are some, especially knife forms,

which irrefutably point to connections with the easternmost province of steppe art, Sui-yüan and Ordos (but not, on the other hand, with Scythia, where such knives do not even exist). This “province of art” did not become known until after the Great War, when suddenly sensational finds of “Scythian” plaques, pendants, fittings buckles, and weapons with animal ornamentation, were made there. Once again the steppe regions proved to have been a cultural unit as early as during the Bronze Age.

ANIMAL SCULPTURES

The nomad herdsmen who produced the Bronze Age culture of Sui-yüan must have been the Huns; and it was they, too, who provided the link between Minussinsk and China. In a region bordering in the south on the highly developed bronze culture of the Shang and Chou periods in China, and having contacts in the northwest areas so rich in metals as the Altai and the Yenisei basin, it was but natural for reflections or imported art objects to have made their appearance too. Hence it would seem mistaken *a priori* to want to date all of the Ordos finds no earlier than about the fifth century B.C. because of the parallels to be found here with Scythia on the one hand and the late Chou period on the other. We need only recall that the Huns, although under another name, participated as allies of the Chous in the overthrow of the Shang dynasty to become aware of their intimate relations with China. The very few excavated specimens of animal style must be dated, it is true, relatively late (about fourth century B.C. and later), but this does not necessarily mean that this late date applies in general. The great differences in style are enough not to allow the material to be pressed into a few centuries.

Let us look at a small figure of a stag from the Ordos region (Fig. 6); flatter in its design than the Minussinsk specimen (Fig. 5), somewhat less forceful and more conventional, it is undoubtedly more closely related to the latter than to the superior Scythian specimen (Fig. 3), which in this comparison, too, proves itself more abstract and ornamental. A unique fragment of a boar (Fig. 7) is of particular interest: this powerful, clear formulation of the



Fig. 5



Fig. 6



Fig. 7



Fig. 8

Fig. 5 Stag (bronze plaque) from Minussinsk. (National Museum, Helsinki)

Fig. 6 Stag (bronze plaque) from Ordos region. (Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities, Stockholm)

Fig. 7 Fragment of a boar from Ordos region. (Collection Dr. H. Müller, Peking)

Fig. 8 Crouching hind (bronze statuette) from Ordos region. (Collection Von der Heydt, Vienna)

animal with its broad surfaces cannot possibly be regarded as an echo of the boar's head from the Kuban delta; hence it does not have to be a later product. The Ordos region has also yielded animal sculptures in hollow casting such as, for example, the charming bronze hind (FIG. 8). There is little in the way of western products which can be compared to them; and there are hardly any animal sculptures of this kind known in China, seen with such tender understanding and yet so soberly, full of natural freshness. Apparently such comprehension is only possible with a profound concern for the life of the animal in the herd or out in the open, a concern felt by the herdsman and hunter, in contrast to the tiller of fields, in whose art the animal appears more as a mythical or symbolical creature. Almost all early Chinese representations of animals are rooted in the mythological, are imaginary and hard to interpret; exceptions are to be found practically only among the small jade sculptures, among which, strangely enough, we find many elements which seem related to the miniature bronzes of the steppes: bird, tiger, stag, animal with turned head, ox head, cicada, coiled animal.

UNEXPECTED LINKS

But there is another exception, to which H. Kühn was the first to draw attention. During the last ten years, Anyang (Honan) has yielded formerly completely unknown types of bronze harness and knives decorated with animal heads (horse, elk, ram) in the "Sino-Siberian style" and, moreover—as in the case of the so-called Tomb of the Elephant (contents in the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto)—together with sacrificial bronzes in pure Shang style! These curved-back knives with ring knob or animal-head knob from the end of the second millennium B.C. show great similarity to those of the Minussinsk Karasuk stage, whose dating they thus confirm. Further research will probably be able in time more clearly to establish the early level of Ordos art. Simultaneously, however, the problem becomes more intricate again; for what is originally Chinese, what originally Siberian in these Shang knives, cannot as yet be determined at all. But facts as they are have at least made it definitely clear that the center of origin of the earliest Eurasian animal style was somewhere in the East and that we must apparently reckon with a Chinese element which no one even dreamed of twenty years ago.

A historian presents a little-known chapter in the history of a much-discussed people.

THE JEWS IN THE ROMAN EMPIRE

By GERHARD KITTEL

ANY discussion of the Jews as a people must proceed from the fact that the Jews are not a race but a racial mixture. Among the Jews we find tall and short people, slim and thickset ones, people with narrow faces and with wide faces, with long, narrow heads and with short, wide heads, with brown eyes and with blue eyes, dark- and fair-haired, people with soft hair and people with coarse hair, people with "Jewish" noses and people with straight noses. How did the Jews arrive at this anthropological state? As the thousand years of the ghetto up to its abolishment in the nineteenth century represented a period of segregation, the question as to the origins of the Jewish racial mixture leads us to an age that must have preceded the ghetto, i.e., that of ancient Rome.

The decisive turning point in the ancient history of the Jews and their predecessors, the Israelites, was the Babylonian Exile, into which they were sent by King Nebuchadnezzar after repeated insurrections and which lasted throughout the better part of the sixth century. The pre-Exile history of the Hebrews represents a process of coalescence of three known racial components: the Oriental race, which brought with it the original Semitic language and

culture; the Near Eastern race, from which the Jews got their hooked nose; and the Mediterranean race, which lived in those regions before the Semitic population arrived and which was absorbed by all Semitic peoples. These three racial nucleuses form the basic racial stock underlying the ancient Israelites as well as the later Jews in all their evolution up to the present day.

ANCIENT RACIAL BIOLOGY

After the destruction of the Babylonian empire by the Persians, the Jews were allowed to return to Palestine. There they accepted the laws of Ezra, a Jewish priest who introduced one of the most radical racial legislations known in world history (fifth century B.C.). Ezra regarded the Babylonian captivity as God's punishment of the Jews for having intermarried with other peoples (Ezra IX, X). Consequently, all marriages of Jews with non-Jewish women were dissolved at the time. Modern Jews have praised these laws as "an outstanding deed of conscious racial breeding" and as a "splendid achievement of racial biology." However, Ezra's laws, which at first sharply segregated the Jews, only preceded a process which in the course of the next few